

Far From Home, A Saudi Opposition Makes Voice Heard

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By Hoge

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A modest two-story red brick house indistinct from others along a North London street bears no signs of being the headquarters of a campaign challenging royal rule in Saudi Arabia.

The marks of the exiles' activity are very noticeable, however, in the streets of Saudi Arabia itself, where hundreds of people have been arrested by antiriot police this month for taking part in a protest demonstration, a rare occurrence in the monarchy's history.

Government alarm at the dissidents' influence was reflected Sunday in a Ramadan-eve address in Riyadh from the country's senior religious leader, the grand mufti, Sheik Abdul Aziz al-Sheik.

Warning people to shun such demonstrations, he said, "Seeking to undermine security or destabilize Muslim lands is prohibited, and a Muslim should not get involved in this."

The protesters are being inspired by the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, a group of London-based Saudis who have transformed a back room in the suburban house into a broadcasting studio with a jumble of computerized transmission equipment, faxes, mixers, mobile phone hook-ups and video screens.

They represent the first opposition voice broadcasting into the kingdom, which maintains a tight control on information and bans demonstrations.

Their summons to two street protests in Saudi Arabia, the first on Oct. 14 and the second on Thursday, emboldened so many people to take part that the police ended up arresting more than 350 people. The head of the movement, Saad al-Fagih, said he was as surprised by the turnout as the government was alarmed by it.

"I thought it was too early to call Saudis into the streets, that people needed their confidence built up to face the regime," he said.

"I thought they were convinced individually, but since our culture is not one of demonstrations and vigils or opposing the government in a public manner, I never imagined they would appear in such numbers."

He said the events gave the movement unanticipated momentum.

"For most of them, it was their first collective experience," he said. "They had come only with Korans in their hands and mats to kneel on, and they found themselves being treated very harshly. They are very angry about that."

Mr. Fagih said he believed the movement's Al-Islah network was reaching an audience in the millions because of the large number of individual satellite

dishes in Saudi Arabia.

Screens in the dim back room flicker with hundreds of text messages from people who have heard the broadcasts and want to offer up evidence of their own of government abuse, corruption and nepotism, and surreptitious pictures of people being marched away to police vans.

People communicate with his service by cellphone and Internet chat rooms, and a device in the London studio can disguise voices if the callers want protection.

In a remarkable development for a closed society, callers from Riyadh used mobile telephones to give the station accounts of the Oct. 14 police crackdown, which were immediately played back to Saudi listeners.

One of the most graphic accounts was of the arrest and beating of Um Saud, a 65-year-old woman who had displayed a picture of her son, Saud al-Mutayri, who was killed in a prison fire, in a plea to have his body returned to her.

Her case was taken up Friday by Amnesty International, which called on the Saudi government to release her and the hundreds of others being held.

The protests have been mounted despite the Saudi royal family's announcement this month that Saudi Arabia would hold its first elections next year for local councils.

Mr. Fagih dismissed the move, the first concession to democracy advocates, as a "cosmetic" one. "Even Saddam Hussein had elections, but without freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, they are worthless," he said.

Mr. Fagih, 44, is a member of a prominent Saudi family, and he and three of his six siblings are doctors who number among their patients ranking members of the royal family.

"Our father told us that only physicians are really independent of others," Mr. Fagih said. "If you are a doctor, even kings and princes will have to lie down in front of you."

He came to London in 1994 as an asylum seeker after he took part in petition drives in Saudi Arabia for three years and ended up in prison. "I was only jailed for a month," he said. "I wasn't beaten or tortured because I come from a prominent family that is distantly related to the royal family, and I was a surgeon at the main teaching hospital in Riyadh and a professor at King Saud University."

The government has jammed Al-Islah's radio broadcasts for the past five days, and satellite broadcasts have repeatedly been shut down, but Mr. Fagih is confident his engineers will restore full transmission. He said that the demand from listeners was intense.

"They have become addicted, even if we keep repeating the same information," he said. "After 70 years of secrecy and deception, we come along with this whole load of truth, and the effect has been overwhelming."

Asked if his organization's purpose was reform of the monarchy or its removal, he said, "Before Oct. 14, even people who agreed with us thought we were talking about things that were impossible in Saudi Arabia, and they called me impractical and unrealistic. But now I am confident to say that the downfall of the regime is an inevitable result of what has started."

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